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ABSTRACT

The teacher-centered model that has dominated instruction for centuries is slowly giving way to a learner-centered conception with instructors in roles of facilitators, or "guides on the side." Active learning and collaboration increasingly characterize learning environments. E-learning is unable to promote learning on its own. Its use does not preclude facilitators' responsibilities for structuring learning experiences. The effectiveness and success of e-learning programs depend on facilitators' roles in delivering and managing instruction. E-learning facilitators take on four roles to meet the necessary conditions of effectiveness, because they "wear four pairs of shoes." These are: (1) instructors, (2) social directors, (3) managers, and (4) technical assistants. The framework discussed in this paper provides a means of describing tasks and responsibilities of e-learning facilitators. (Contains 30 references.) (Author)

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Wearing Four Pairs of Shoes: The Roles of E-Learning Facilitators

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The teacher-centered model that has dominated instruction for centuries is slowly giving way to a learner-centered conception with instructors in roles of facilitators, or "guides on the side." Active learning and collaboration increasingly characterize learning environments. E-learning is unable to promote learning on its own; its use does not preclude facilitators' responsibilities for structuring learning experiences. The effectiveness and success of e-learning programs depend on facilitators' roles in delivering and managing instruction. E-learning facilitators take on four roles to meet the necessary conditions of effectiveness, because they "wear four pairs of shoes," - instructors, social directors, managers, and technical assistants. The framework herein provides a means of describing tasks and responsibilities of e-learning facilitators.

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Introduction

The emergence of e-learning comes during a time when education and training are undergoing important transformations. The teacher-centered model that has dominated instruction for centuries is slowly giving way to a learner-centered conception with instructors in roles of facilitators, or "guides on the side." (Bens, 2000; Hanna, 2000). Learning environments are increasingly characterized by active learning and collaboration (Mantayla, 2000; Rosenberg, 2001).

E-learning is unable to promote learning on its own; its use does not preclude facilitators' responsibilities for structuring learning experiences (Imel, 1998). The effectiveness and success of e-Learning programs are dependent on facilitators' roles in delivering and managing instruction.

The primary focus of this paper is the roles e-Learning facilitators must assume to be effective. The paper is organized in four major sections; facilitators "wear four pairs of shoes," - instructor, social director, program manager, and technical assistant (Collins & Berge, 1996).

A Framework for Defining Roles of E-Learning Facilitators

Instructor - Consultant, Guide, and Resource Provider

The role of facilitator as instructor is consistent with seminal adult learning research in which instructors guide self-directed learning in problem-centered environments (Cross, 1998; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Wlodkowski, 1993). Facilitators are resources for learning rather than instructors who have all the answers (Brookfield, 1986). They employ some of the same best practices as traditional classroom instructors (Merriam & Calfarella, 1998), however the roles assumed and skills used differentiate the two approaches.

Facilitators provide their own unique insights as they guide learners to acquire knowledge and develop skills. Their primary instructional tasks are a) providing information to help learners complete assignments, b) suggesting ideas or strategies, and c) helping learners to connect content with prior knowledge (Collins & Berge, 1996).

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A discussion of some best practices and their implications for E-Learning is presented below.

Fostering Learner-Centeredness

Educators in the field of adult learning (e.g., Brookfield, 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1998) support the premise that facilitators humanize self-directed learning by focusing on learners rather than technology (Willis, 1993). The essential quality of learner-centeredness is most relevant when learners are personally challenged with a problem to solve, a project to complete, or a dilemma to resolve (Abbey, 2000; Schreiber & Berge, 2000).

Facilitators and learners often participate together as partners in learning activities (Driscoll, 1998; Merriam & Calfarella, 1998). Specifically, facilitators guide learners to play a part in determining course direction by discovering content on their own, carrying out assignments and projects (Kearsley, 2000), and creating learning opportunities to meet their own needs (Khan, 1997).

Implications for E-Learning

The variety of interactive tools and resources on the World Wide Web highlight the importance of selecting instructional methods (e.g., forums, case study analyses). Facilitators manage the distribution of learner-selected activities and scaffold them with comments and support to guide and support learner achievement (Khan, 1997).

In virtual asynchronous environments, learners are often expected to participate in establishing an agenda, defining objectives, and assessing outcomes. In virtual synchronous environments, learners may share responsibility for programs when facilitators take roles as mutual learners.

Structuring Problem-Based Learning and Authentic Work

Facilitators structure realistic problem-based experiences to make content more personally meaningful for learners (Woolfolk, 1998). Knowledge is adapted to the settings, purposes, and tasks to which it is applied (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, cited in Berliner & Calfee, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Facilitators tend to change their style of teaching from didactic to project-based approaches in which learners ask questions, perform investigations, and act on their findings. They also use strategies such as small-group discussions, simulations, case studies, and collaborative activities to engage learners in problem solving (Khan, 1997). They ask questions and closely monitor learners' efforts and are available for assistance (Hanna, 2000).

Implications for E-Learning

Problem-based learning is compatible with e-learning because both environments can be highly authentic in nature and provide access to resources and expertise. Facilitators help learners use the conferencing capabilities of the World Wide Web to provide them with access to expert thinking and modeling. In real-life settings, experts and those who are more experienced help learners solve problems. The resources of the web also can be utilized in an authentic context for solving problems using the strategy of cognitive apprenticeship. Experts and learning guides may be available through mentoring, tutoring, learner work groups, etc. (Khan, 1997).

When learners practice what experts in their discipline do each day, the real nature of technology to change the curriculum occurs. Facilitators are free to use strategies that allow learners to edit, revise, and try again, thus taking an authentic approach to problem solving (Shreiber & Berge, 2000). In this way, technology may change the curriculum without changing the content.

The uses of email, e-conferencing, web databases, groupware, and audio/videoconferencing significantly increase the extent and ease of interaction amongst all participants. The vast array of software tools available for analysis, design, planning, problem solving, and making presentations enable learners to perform sophisticated and complex tasks. Technology provides a milieu that fosters the kind of creativity and communication needed to solve problems in creative ways.

Providing Informative Feedback

Some educators (e.g., Hiltz, 1995) believe that the most important facilitator behavior is timely and personal response to questions and contributions of learners. Facilitators provide informative timely feedback with concise brief statements. They a) offer learners guidance about how they might improve their performance, b) communicate what learners have and have not demonstrated, and c) provide learners with specific detailed information about strengths and weaknesses of their performance.

Both what facilitators say and how they say it has an impact on learners. In fact, the ways facilitators respond may have greater influence on learner behavior than questions asked. In addition, learners' perceptions of their progress may be more important than positive facilitator evaluation of their work (Brookfield, 1986).

Although praise appears to be an encouraging response, making judgments is associated with bringing conformity. If praise is given, facilitators must communicate why performance is positive. For example, "your speech is clear and concise" provides more constructive feedback than "Good job, I like the way you speak" (Brophy, 1998). Facilitators may offer praise or encouragement, however a preferred alternative is to encourage learners to evaluate their own responses.

Implications for E-Learning

Feedback is even more critical in e-Learning than traditional classrooms because learners may feel isolated and detached due to lack of environmental and nonverbal signals. (Kearsley, 2000; Khan, 1997; Willis, 1993).

Constructive and extensive feedback to individuals usually takes the form of email messages about assignments or comments on assignments. Facilitators may also summarize and/or synthesize individual responses given on a topic or activity by posting messages in a discussion forum or conference.

The element of timely feedback is especially important (Kearsley, 2000; Khan, 1997; Paloff & Pratt, 1999). Facilitators should establish a standard such as a forty-eight hour turnaround time.

Learners should provide feedback to each other too; facilitators must establish peer feedback as an expectation in delineated guidelines posted at the beginning of a course. Guidelines can be discussed and negotiated by all learners (Paloff & Pratt, 1999).

Social Director - Creator of Collaborative Environments

Fostering Collaborative Learning

The process of facilitation itself is collaborative. Facilitators and learners are involved in a cooperative undertaking in that leadership and facilitative roles are assumed by different group members to initiate and guide learning efforts.
Underlying collaborative learning is the belief that learners achieve best in social interactions based on consensus building and cooperation. (Brookfield, 1986).

As they promote interpersonal relationships and help learners work together, facilitators guide a developing sense of community within and between small groups. Perhaps the most meaningful facilitation in this collaborative structure is modeling interaction techniques and assuming the role of a group member who contributes to learning (Paloff & Pratt, 1999).

Facilitators stimulate learner participation and interaction by using small group discussions, collaborative projects, case studies, dyadic learning partnership exchanges, and one-on-one exchanges (Berge, 1995). In addition, they monitor and participate in discussion forums or conferences to identify misconceptions or guide more fruitful directions.

Effective facilitators keep discussions focused on the topic, bring out multiple perspectives, and summarize and synthesize main points (Berge, 1996; Kearsley, 2000; Salomon, 2000). They use questions and probes to help learners connect around shared problems, interests, and experiences (Collins & Berge, 1996; Paulsen, 1995).

Implications for E-Learning

Experts in the field of e-learning (e.g., Collins & Berge, 1996; Kearsley, 2000) contend the most important facilitation skills involve encouraging and ensuring a high degree of interactivity and participation. Facilitators support the learning process through the use of collaborative assignments and active discussions.

Interactions among learners may be almost as important as content-oriented goals. Therefore, facilitators begin a course by posting introductions and encouraging learners to seek areas of common interest as they meet in distinctive gathering places, such as chat rooms (Paloff & Pratt, 1999).

Facilitators encourage interaction among learners, facilitators, and subject-matter experts via the Internet using email, list serves, news groups, multi-user discussions (MUDs), forums, Internet Relay Chat, (IRC) and conferencing (Berge, 1996; Driscoll, 1998; Kearsley, 2000; Paulsen, 1995). Kearsley (2000) suggests the use of tangibles such as discussion areas, learner directories modified by learners, and newsletters relevant to particular fields of study.

Facilitators can not be in control of everything learned, given the limitations of time and access to the learner population. Therefore, they guide learners in working together to become more skilled in areas such as scheduling, project management, time management, consensus building, and leadership.

Program Manager - Director of the Agenda

Facilitators as managers are responsible for organizational, procedural, and administrative duties. A consistent theme in the literature is the facilitators' use of organizers to provide an overview of a course. In addition, they show strong leadership, managing interactions proactively by defining expected behaviors of learners through guidelines, protocols, and netiquette (Berge, 1995).

Facilitators develop study guides for courses to help ease learners' anxiety and address both the content and any common technical concerns. Study guides provide introductory information, describe learning activities and resources materials, and provide additional information about course components or procedures (Berge, 1995).

Facilitators are available to help learners manage their time and avoid information overload (Salmon, 2000). Many learners may not be accustomed to increased independence and the vast array of available information.

Technical Assistant - Model of Proficiency

Facilitators as technical assistants help learners become comfortable with systems and software. Assistance also includes preparing learners to resolve any technical difficulties that may occur. The ultimate technical goal for facilitators is to make the technology transparent. When this occurs, learners may concentrate on the academic task at hand (Berge, 1995). The more familiar facilitators are with the technology, the more they can focus on learners rather than technology (Madden, 1998).

Effective facilitators feel comfortable using media and communication tools. Ideally, they can use a variety of media (text, graphics, audio, video) to present material. Such variety may accommodate individual learning styles and provide approaches for both visual and auditory learners (Jones et al.). As an example, "Gen-Xers" typically prefer fast-paced presentations with visual images and frequent feedback.

Summary

This paper has described tasks and responsibilities of e-Learning facilitators as they take on four distinct roles - instructor, social director, program manager, and technical assistant. The following responsibilities represent a considerable aspect of an E-learning facilitator's efforts:

- Address needs of adult learners by guiding self-directed, realistic, problem-based learning experiences.
- Structure learning opportunities in which learners make their own meanings by discovering content on their own.
- Encourage high degrees of participation and interactivity.
- Offer prompt, informative feedback.
- Provide strong leadership.
- Help learners feel comfortable with technology.

Steps should be taken to develop standards for development and implementation of quality e-Learning programs. It is prudent to establish standards for facilitators' responsibilities. Framing their roles generically herein is a step toward helping them be more cognizant of their efforts.

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